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SUBJECT: DIYALA PROVINCE: PERCEPTIONS OF SECTARIANISM
CONTRIBUTE TO TENSIONS IN MUQDADIYAH

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Classified By: Classified by Diyala PRT Leader Lisa Piascik for reasons
1.4 (b, d)

11. (U) This is a Diyala Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) message.

12. (C) Summary: A spate of arrests and assassinations of Sunni leaders and a perception of sectarian bias among the Iraqi Police in the strategically important Muqdadiyah area of Diyala are undermining reconciliation efforts and the Sunni community's faith in the Iraqi government. In addition, provincial and local leaders believe that central government targeting of Sunnis and Iranian incitement are increasing tensions in the run-up to the March 7th national elections. Compounding these issues is the wide-spread belief that the Iraqi police are not only biased, but corrupt, and ongoing fears of sectarian retribution that are a significant deterrence to the return of the large number of Internally Displaced Person (IDP) families from Muqdadiyah.

MUQDADIYAH: THE HEARTLAND OF DIYALA

13. (C) Muqdadiyah qa'da (district) is located in the center of Diyala province and has an estimated population of over 200,000 (note: Diyala's population is estimated at about 1.5 million). It is also an important regional economic and political hub. Often called the "bread-basket" of Diyala, Muqdadiyah was an historic trading center located along the famed "Silk Road" and more recently, it boasted the third largest market in Iraq - until Al Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI) burned it down in 2007 (ref A). It is also an important political center and many of Diyala's leading officials, including at least seven provincial council members and Diyala's Governor, Dr. Abd-al-Nasr Muntzir Billah al-Mahdawi, hail from this area. In more recent years, however, Muqdadiyah became notorious as an AQI stronghold, with years of fierce fighting between Sunni insurgents and Shi'a militia groups - both of whom recruited participants from the local community. (Note: Muqdadiyah is approximately 50 percent Sunni, 30 percent Shi'a and 10 percent Kurd). While fighting has now abated and PRT contacts claim "90 percent" of AQI has been vanquished, simmering tensions have not so easily dissipated. Moreover, the large number of IDPs from this area (some PRT contacts report the number as high as 12,000 families) create additional complications for reconciliation.

SECTARIAN TENSIONS CONTINUE TO SIMMER IN MUQDADIYAH

14. (C) With its diverse population, Muqdadiyah remains an important pulse point for gauging the state of sectarian tensions in Diyala. It is also strategically located between Baghdad, Iran and the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR). Contacts such as Omar al Faruq Mahdawi (Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) and

the Governor,s brother) note that the area is treated as a battleground by those, like Iran, who want to influence or control the province. Summing up the state of affairs for this strategic area, Dr. Ahmed Hamed Al Baka (Shi'a), Diyala's party leader for the National Reform Trend, described Muqdadiah as a "simmering cauldron of tribal and personal disputes sitting on the still warm and sparking coals of sectarian violence." In recent months, PRT contacts have been reporting that tensions in this area are being exacerbated by two critical factors: ongoing arrests and assassinations of Sunnis in disproportionate numbers and perceptions of sectarian bias and increasing corruption of the Iraqi police) as well as their links to Iranian-backed special groups.

SUNNIS VIEW ARRESTS AS ELECTION SHAPING BY SHI'A-BIASED GOI
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15. (C) As previously reported, arrests of Sunni leaders) both civilian and Sons of Iraq (SOIz)) on terrorism-related charges are reinforcing Sunni perceptions that they are being unfairly targeted province-wide (ref B and C). Provincial Council (PC) member Batull Ahmad Hasan (IIP) highlighted a common provincial belief when she noted Muqdadiah is beset with a disproportionate number of these arrests. Local Sunni citizens of the Muqdadiah city of Abu Sayda assert that government services have been centralized in the city center to unfairly penalize Sunni citizens. (Note: in general, more Sunnis live in rural areas and more Shi,a live in urban centers of Muqdadiah).

16. (C) PC member Abdullah Jabbouri (Sunni, Allawi party) blamed rising tensions in Muqdadiah on politically motivated arrests driven by central government authorities, as well as incitement from Iranian-backed special militia groups looking to encourage sectarian tensions. Fakhri Khalif Shihab (IIP) noted that the IIP has a strong base in Muqdadiah and that

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it is being intentionally targeted through both arrests and assassinations to weaken its election prospects. Muqdadia's City Council Chairman Ra'ad (IIP) stated that he is running for the Council of Representatives (CoR) but fears both arrest and assassination. Muqdadiah's Qa'im maqam (district administrator), Zaid Ibrahim Hassan Ali Al Azawi (IIP), said that the arrests are intended to intimidate voters prior to the elections.

BIASED AND CORRUPT IP DRIVER OF INSTABILITY

17. (C) In addition, negative perceptions of the Iraqi Police are also stoking tensions in Muqdadiah. Some Shi'a, as well as Sunni, community leaders believe that the local IP are both biased and corrupt, with ties to special militia groups and Iran. (Note: these perceptions are backed up by U.S. military intelligence reporting documenting such ties). During a recent visit to Muqdadiah, the Abu Sayda city mayor, Muhammad Majeed Hussan Al Surewy (Shi'a) publicly accused the local IP Chief, Kharallah Abd Ahmed (Shi'a), of trying to assassinate him and of having links to Jaysh Al Mahdi-Special Groups (JAM-SG). Privately, Mayor Muhammed noted that his biggest concern was the link between IP members and Iran, and that he believed it was their intent to take control of polling centers during the elections through arrests and intimidation. (Comment: IP interference with polling stations was documented during the 2009 Provincial Council elections in Muqdadiah (ref D)).

18. (C) Muqdadia Council Chairman Ra'ad noted to PRToff that as 80 percent of the IP in the area are Shi'a and over 50 percent of the population is Sunni, bias is not just real but inevitable. Chairman Ra'ad and others also note that while not all IP are biased, many are corrupt, and there is a significant lack of trust between the people and the police, especially among Sunni communities. Multiple PRT contacts recount stories of Muqdadiah IPs refusing to arrest their

friends or family members) a significant problem when most IP hail from the local community) or taking bribes to generate false accusations. (Note: the Governor recently reported that buying a false confession in Diyala cost only between 85 and 200 USD). In the wake of several recent high-profile arrests of Shi'a leaders, such as Harith Sadoun, in Muqdadiyah, many Shi'a leaders are also complaining they are based on false accusations (Comment: These recent arrests, however, were of individuals with well-documented terrorist and criminal activities)(ref E).

IDPs: POTENTIAL FLASHPOINT FOR TENSIONS

¶9. (C) Creating additional reconciliation complexities, more than 25 percent of the total 40,000 IDP families in Diyala are from Muqdadiyah. PC Chairwoman for IDPs, Azhar Hamid Majid (IIP), noted that in Muqdadiyah there are two types of IDPs: those who can return if provided with housing and services, and those who cannot due to continuing security issues. Explaining this issue further, Muqdadiyah's qa'im maqam commented that some families have problems returning not only because of continuing tribal and personal disputes, but also because they had committed previous acts of violence against local community members. He and others specifically noted difficulties for families from areas like Hey al Askaree and Baz al Shakha and villages such as Karagul and Chetchan, among others. The Muqdadiyah Tribal Support Council comprised of local Sheikhs (primarily Shi'a) report that they are working on reconciliation among IDP families, but they also agree that there are continuing security concerns for some Sunni and Shi'a families who want to return.

PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT EFFORTS TO ADDRESS ARRESTS

¶10. (C) The recent arrests of both Sunni (and Shi'a) leaders has sparked several peaceful protests in Muqdadiyah over the past month. Leaders and local community members have specifically highlighted concerns about arrest warrants issued by out-of-province courts, and arrests conducted by out-of-province security units from Baghdad. During a 15 December session with the Governor, Provincial Council members raised this issue and subsequently wrote a still unanswered letter to the Prime Minister asking that the Diyala Provincial Government be informed of the issuance of any outside warrants or outside forces executing these warrants prior to such action within the province. In addition, in response to concerns about false accusations, on 23 December the Governor, the Provincial Director of Police (PDOP) Dr. Adbul Hussein Ali Damook, and Diyala Province Chief Judge Fa'iq Hattab Dummad al-Rubai agreed to set up a committee to review all Article 4 terrorism-related cases, past and present in Diyala. (Comment: It remains unclear under what jurisdiction such a committee would be entitled to function or if it is more than a politically-motivated solution designed to placate Sunni voters prior to the

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elections. End comment).

¶11. (C) COMMENT: Sunnis in Muqdadiyah appear to be taking a "wait and see" attitude with regards to the recent arrests and violence, and are not rushing to arms. This includes the SOIz, who are continuing to receive sporadic salaries from the GOI. Growing disillusionment with the GOI does, however, make Sunnis more vulnerable to the appeal of insurgent and Baathist groups in the area. Moreover, a perception of interference by a "biased" IP during the elections or rising violence against returning IDPs, could rapidly heat up the lingering tensions. End Comment.

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